

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL POVERTY CONTEXT AND THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL POVERTY REDUCTION POLICIES ON THE KHMER ETHNIC MINORITY IN THE MEKONG DELTA

The issue as to what are the fundamental causes of poverty among the Khmer community in An Giang Province can only be understood by taking into account the historical evolution of the Mekong Delta as a whole. In this chapter I will examine the impacts of government poverty alleviation programs and policies on the Khmer people living in the Mekong Delta. My initial focus is placed on the Khmer people's original settlement in the Mekong Delta, before reviewing their history, culture and social aspects under the changing policies of the feudal and colonial periods up to 1975. I argue that the consequences of different government poverty reduction policies have been significant for the inhabitants of the Mekong Delta in general, and the Khmers in particular, particularly in terms of their social practices, cultural values and political economy. After that, I explore the impacts of poverty reduction programs on the poor ethnic communities in more recent years, covering three aspects; a discussion of the different approaches to and measurements of poverty, and the main achievements made and challenges faced when conducting these earlier policies in relation to the poor in the area. Furthermore, I will attempt to explain the role of non-government organizations (NGOs) in the fight against poverty, and in particular in relation to the Khmer ethnicity in the Mekong Delta.

2.1 Historical and Cultural Poverty Context for the Khmer in the Mekong Delta

This section provides an overview of the historical and cultural background to the Khmer people living in the Mekong Delta, plus will examine the consequences of policies introduced during the colonial regimes and after 1975 in terms of their socio-economic, political and cultural impacts. Focusing on the above aspects, this section

will provide a comprehensive insight into the root causes of poverty among the Khmer community.

2.1.1. The Khmer Community in the Mekong Delta

Unlike in the Red River Delta, which has been inhabited over the years exclusively by the Vietnamese (Kinh majority people), the Mekong Delta has been populated by different ethnic groups over time, including the Viet, Khmer, Hoa and a few thousand Cham. Each ethnic group originally lived in a separate location, spoke its own language, and practiced its own religion, with the resulting integration process within and between these various ethnic groups into the Vietnamese national community marked by a number of historical periods.

This region has been inhabited since pre-history and from the earliest periods of Christianity. Although the Vietnamese people were quite structured in the early days, they were quite amorphous among the Khmer (Brocheux, 1995; Mac Duong, 1991). Archaeological findings claim that the Mekong Delta was partly occupied by Khmer people from the Chen La Kingdom at the end of sixth century (Coq and others, 2001), after the Funan Empire had disintegrated.

This region occupied by ethnic Khmer became known the ‘Lower Khmer’ or ‘Lower Cambodia’ - part of the Chen La Empire, and likely maintained settlements for several centuries, especially during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. However, during that time Chen La had a power struggle with the Kingdom of Champa, which, although mainly based along the coast of the South Sea, expanded west to the Mekong Delta area, seizing control of Prey Nokor by the end of the thirteenth century.

A different opinion is provided by Mac Duong (1991), who says that the Mekong Delta became an attractive area for poor Khmer people struggling against feudal oppression. In particular, under the Angkor Empire most of these people migrated and settled in the region (Mac Duong, 1991: 29), and as a result, according to Mac Duong from the early seventeenth century Khmer people lived around the Mekong Delta, but lived in separate areas and had no relationship with any nation state during that time (Mac Duong, 1991: 30).

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the Vietnamese migrated from the north and settled in this area long occupied by the Khmers, whose empire had once stretched from present-day northern Thailand and southern Laos to the mouth of the Mekong River (Giang and others, 2006:27 and Brocheux, 1995: xv). This migration of the Vietnamese to the Mekong Delta is referred to as the “March to the South” (Brocheux, 1995: xv). However, according to Mac Duong (1991: 44), most Khmer people in the Mekong Delta lived in poverty due to war and feudal oppression, which lasted many generations (this will be analyzed in the following section). The Khmer of Cambodia lived in this region for centuries, making them the pioneers of the Mekong Delta. In addition, Vien (1984:6) argues that land reclamation in the Delta was mostly carried out by the Khmers and the Vietnamese, who co-existed in an almost virgin region.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese had become established in the central portion of the Delta, an area known as *Mien Trung* in Vietnamese, while the displaced Khmer migrated to the western portion, or *Mien Tay* in Vietnamese. Moreover, the Chinese,¹ who in the seventeenth century were allowed by the Nguyen princes to settle in the south, gradually integrated with the Vietnamese community (Vien, 1984: 11), being settlers and merchants fleeing from the Manchu invasions or searching for new markets. These Chinese both preceded and accompanied the Vietnamese influx (Brocheux, 1995: xv), and this suggests that the Chinese and Vietnamese formed a significant proportion of the population in parts of the Delta, even by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Brocheux states that the Vietnamese became the majority in the Delta, because they during the course of their southward migration along the peninsula they partially assimilated the native Chams and Khmers (Brocheux, 1995: 107). Vien (1984: 8) states that villagers were bound by a very strong solidarity that came not from strongly established institutions, as in the north of Vietnam, but rather from the joint efforts of pioneers in the face of common dangers. As a result, here people were ready to go further so as to claim more land.

¹ Thousands of Chinese loyal to the Ming Dynasty fled from the new Qing Dynasty regime that came to power in China in the seventeenth century. They were allowed by the Nguyen princes to settle in the south of Vietnam. These immigrants eventually became Vietnamese citizens (Vien, 1984:19).

Mac Duong (1991: 33) asserts that during the administration of the Nguyen Dynasty between 1817 and 1860, many desolate regions were reclaimed in the Mekong Delta, such as Sap Mountain (in 1817), Soc Trang, Tinh Bien and seven mountainous areas (in 1851). As a result, the influx of new immigrants exerted pressure, while the feudal state (the Nguyen principality between the seventeenth and eighteenth century and the royal dynasty during the nineteenth century) tightened its grip over the communities of pioneers (Vien et al., 1984: 8). This association was based on well-understood needs, even though the benefits were not shared equally. As such, the socio-economic structure in *Mien Tay* appeared homogenous.

2.1.2. Demographic Profile

Based on the above historical developments in the Mekong Delta, my research site – Tri Ton District, was established in 1851 and had a majority of Khmer people (Mac Duong, 1991). When comparing the Kinh (majority people) and Hoa (of Chinese origin), the Kinh community lived in urban areas, along rivers or in convenient trade locations, and owned arable land that they used for rice cultivation and fruit cultivation. The Cham and Hoa people also lived in advantageous natural locations (in the lowest areas of the Delta). In contrast, the Khmer people lived in areas with poor geographical conditions, in the fields around the mountainous slopes, and in separate groups. The small groups were called *phum* in Vietnamese (‘small village’) and large groups were called sok (‘commune’) (Thach, 1993). Due to the more extreme conditions they faced, Khmer communities were rather isolated and self-contained.

Khmer people have been located in the Mekong Delta region (Figure 2.1) for centuries, but there was no data kept on changes to their population over time until the French colonial government began to keep records. During that time, between 1862 and 1888, there were approximately 151,000 Khmers in the area, while the Chinese and Viet numbered 56,000 and over 1.7 million, respectively. According to population census surveys, the Khmer population reached 224,000 by 1929 and around 250,000 by 1940, while the Kinh population increased to over four million over the same period. Right after reunification of the country in 1975, the Khmer population increased significantly, so that by 1976 it had reached approximately

652,000 people, comprising 5% of the population of the south of Vietnam, and with 77,000 in An Giang Province - the fourth largest Khmer population after Soc Trang province, Tra Vinh and Kien Giang. The Khmer usually live at high altitude and along the edges of mountains in Tri Ton, Tinh Bien, Thoai Son and Chau Thanh Districts. In particular, a large Khmer community was established in Triton District, with a population of 32,727 in 2009 and 12,683 households (Triton statistical yearbook, 2009), making up over 65% of the total population of the District, among which 92.6% of the households earn a living through farming (Nguyen, 2008).

According to the 2009 national census, the total population of the Mekong Delta is about eighteen million, of which the Khmer group is the largest ethnic minority group with over 1.05 million people (about 6%), followed by Chinese and Cham with about 230,000 (about 1.4%) and 10,000 people respectively. Large numbers of Khmer are found in the Mekong Delta making up 6.49% population (with around 1.05 million of 16 million) and representing 1.5% of the total population of Vietnam (roughly 1.3 million out of 85.8 million) (GSO, 2009). The Khmer in the Delta are concentrated in 23 districts of the eight provinces of An Giang, Kien Giang, Can Tho, Hau Giang, Vinh Long, Tra Vinh, Soc Trang and Bac Lieu (Figure 3.1). Of these 1.3 million, 53% live under the poverty line based on the MOLISA criteria (discussed on page 19) (Pacode program, 2004). The MPDA also points out that the proportion of poor Khmer is higher than the average for the Delta (32% as compared to 23% for the entire region).

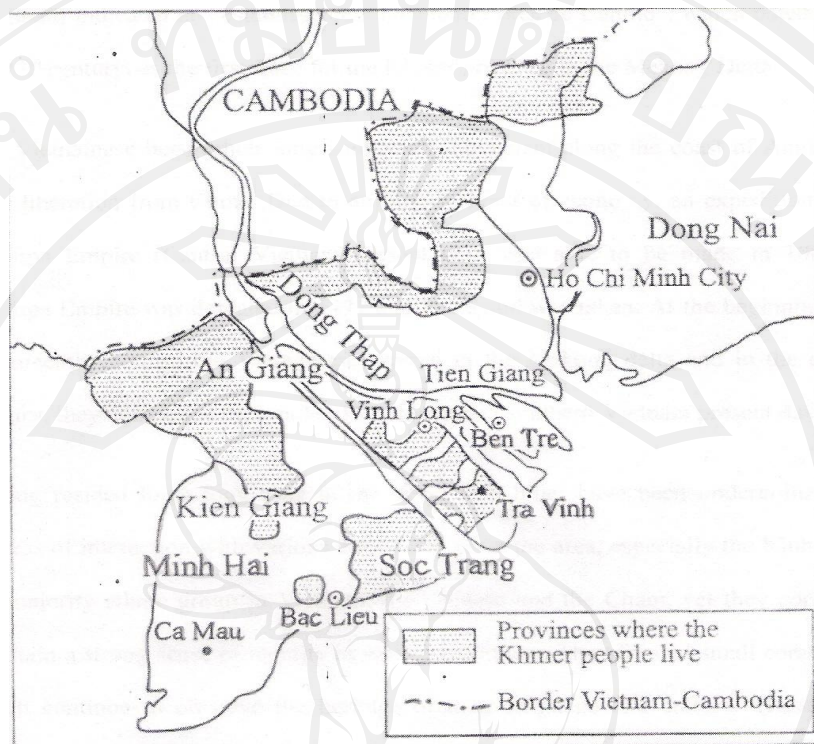


Figure 2.1: Distribution of Khmer in the Mekong Delta (*source: Thach Ngoc Minh, 2002*)

Most of the Khmer live at the base of mountains, with houses built on pilings and surrounded by closed gardens that give them a pleasant appearance. Brocheux (1995:94) states that the rate of increase in the Khmer population is perhaps attributable to their emigration from Cambodia, although reliable evidence is lacking. In the 1940s, Administrator Fraisse (cited by Brocheux, 1995:94) noted that the Khmers of Long Xuyen city in An Giang Province were in the majority near the mountains (now named Tri Ton and Tinh Bien Districts) but that their numbers dwindled significantly as one moved away from these locations. The Khmers commonly gathered in hamlets organized around a temple at this time.

The Khmer Buddhist monastery is a cultural center for the whole community; therefore, plays a very important role in every single aspect of the people's material and spiritual lives. The Khmer also express their beliefs through agriculture and through their many customs, rituals, festivals and annual ceremonies, and in games

and entertainment activities that celebrate fertility, such as rites appealing to the soul or to rice, the full moon festival, the release of the flying lamps, the construction of mountains made out of paddy or sand, and the washing of Buddha statues. Hinayana Buddhism, introduced in the thirteenth century, has always been the principal religion of the Khmer. In the Mekong Delta alone, there are 400 pagodas on average - one pagoda per 1600 inhabitants, and the number of monks in 1980 totalled 10,620. The inheritors of a brilliant civilization, the Khmer make an important contribution to the national culture of Vietnam (Dang Nghiem Son, 1993).

Throughout its history and with the growth of a colonial economy, Vietnam society has had a multi-ethnic structure, though this has strengthened the role of the Vietnamese and reduced the Khmers to a minority position. This has also helped to codify and rigidify the hierarchical class structure (Brocheux, 1995: 136).

2.1.3. Influence of Socio-political and Economic Policies on the Khmer People in the Mekong Delta Prior to 1975

This section reviews the impacts of the pre-colonial, US and French colonial periods on the ethnic minorities in the Mekong Delta, especially the Khmer community. Through their history, I will try to give an overview of Khmer poverty up to the present day.

2.1.3.1. Pre-colonial Period

Under the Nguyen lords and the early Nguyen Dynasty, some heads of the traditional social institutions in rural areas were appointed by the Vietnamese feudal government in order to implement autonomous policies for the southern Khmer but maintain their dominance. Land clearance patterns where a majority of Khmer people resided, such as in Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Rach Gia, and Chau Doc Provinces, have almost been retained up to the present day.

After the late 1920s and following the Minh Mang era (1820-1840), the Nguyen Dynasty used a number of tactics to repress and assimilate the southern Khmer communities living in the Mekong Delta, while continuing to make it beneficial for Kinh and Chinese landowners, who seized Khmer land. The Nguyen

tried to use their power in order to rehabilitate and consolidate proprietor's rights and to strengthen the regime of exploitative oppression for all castes. Taxes were imposed such as the land tax, poll-tax and trade tax, and these steadily increased, accompanied by a harsh and heavy labor regime. This illustrates that the southern Khmer farmers had no way to escape, so they sometimes responded with uprisings lasting a few years, those that attracted a large number of Viet-Khmer farmers. Due to the harsh conditions, farmers were forced to leave their land and homes and relocate in remote or isolated areas. As a result, Khmer farmers' lives were quite marginalized and they faced many problems, including hunger. This is one of the reasons why the Khmers in the Mekong Delta often reside in difficult and remote areas, although they were the earliest residents in the region.

2.1.3.2. French Colonial Policies

The policy used by the French colonialists was to drive a wedge between the ethnic communities, especially between the Kinh and Khmer groups, and to cause great upheaval in the economic and social areas in southern Vietnam. They would find a way to enlist intellectuals and Khmer monks and then support them: "the French maintained the previous assimilation policy of the Nguyen Dynasty with [the] purpose of transforming a conflict between the southern Khmer and the Nguyen Dynasty [in]to a conflict between the former and the Kinh people. On the other [hand], using demagogic tactics, they attempted to bribe some Khmer people in the Mekong Delta, especially intellectuals and monks so as to support them in their aggressive and dominant intentions" (Nam, 2001 cited by Son, 2007).

In terms of economic aspects, the French colonialists quickly realized the importance of rice exports, so in the early twentieth century exploited and developed the Mekong Delta, turning it into one of the main rice exporting areas in Southeast Asian, and they appropriated land from many farmers in the Delta in general, and from the Khmer farmers in particular. At that time, agricultural land was mostly concentrated in the hands of a few landowners from Vietnam, China and Europe. According to the statistics before 1945, landlords and colonialists occupied 51% of the cultivated land nationally, of which nearly 63% was in the south, as illustrated in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Distribution of Agricultural Land Prior to 1945

Unit: %

	Whole Country	North	South
French	9.50	5.40	13.10
Landlords	41.40	21.50	49.80
Communal Land	11.90	23.60	6.10
Church Land	1.20	1.50	1.00
Other	36.00	48.00	30.00
Total	100	100	100

Source: Adapted from Nguyen Hoang Son, 2007

Based on the above statistics, it can be seen that the total land held by colonialists (the French) was 13.1% and by landowners 49.8%, with occupied land in the South (62.9%) being 2.33 times greater than in the North (26.9%), though other components in the South (30%) were 1.6 times lower than in the North (48%). As a consequence, most of the southern farmers became landless from the actions of the colonialists and landowners, as illustrated by some specific statistics for the Mekong Delta, as follows: "someone had above 50 hectares of land...(2.5% of the population) which accounted for 45% of the land; from ten to under 50 hectares [was] 11% of the population...accounting for 32% of [the] land, while under 0.5 hectares [covered]... 23% of [the] land which made up 71% of the population" (Son, 2007).

These early empirical figures demonstrate the large-scale land accumulation that took place during this period of history in the rural areas of the Mekong Delta, as both Vietnamese and Khmer farmers were dispossessed. According to historian Tran Van Giau (cited by Son, 2007) "due to this policy, while large amounts of land were in [the] hands of some indigenous landowners and French landlords...southern rural areas [that] belonged to the French colonialists were landless...the middle class farmers became tenants with no land". Fertile agricultural land in the Mekong Delta led to commodification, with an increasing number of rich farmers accumulating more and more land. Elite landowners and feudal landlords developed significantly; the status of Khmer farmers gradually reduced to allow landowners to increase theirs. Meanwhile

poor farmers were pushed off their land and turned into tenants for overseas as well as domestic landowners.

As mentioned early, this was a time of great change with regard to difficulties in cultivating the land among poor peasants in the Mekong Delta, because they found themselves oppressed at the hands of two regimes. Furthermore, after cooperation between the feudal and the colonial regulations, they suppressed farmers and expropriated their land and rice. In addition to the harsh conditions and injustices mentioned above, the French maintained this regulation and actually doubled the previous taxes, introducing new taxes such as VAT, a land tax and a tax on transportation. Consequently, residents' lives became harsher, and the poor farmers were pushed into dispossession and poverty. The French policies had heavy consequences for history of the Khmer community in Mekong Delta that have still existed persistently.

2.1.3.3. American Colonial Policies

After entering the area, the US continued with policies to assimilate, repress and create ethnic dissidence within communities in the Mekong Delta. With its "nationalization" policy, the government of Ngo Dinh Diem (1954 to 1963) advocated the abrogation of Buddhist studies among institutions in the Khmer community; preventing the Khmer from studying the Phan (Northern Phan) language, an ancient language from India, and the Pali language; plus looked to regulate their dress, and limiting some of their activities, in order to further assimilate the cultures.

Beginning in 1955, the Saigon government issued proclamations (Number Two and Number Seven) on agriculture, in order to change the land ownership status. Through Ordinance Number 57 it reformed the land tenure system, plus regulated tax collection, a submission that caused serious social disorder. One of the first policies of the Saigon government, based on the French landlord position, was introduced in order to create a "Regime of the Republic", its purpose being to counter Communism. After this, the government took land back from the poor peasants and from others who had fought in the war (Son, 2007). The southern landowner class changed the land

opposition rights that had existed prior to August 1945, so that farmers would become impoverished and penniless.

During the early 1970s, the Saigon government sought to care for the poor financially and started to support the United States militarily. A new government under the authority of General Nguyen Van Thieu formulated a new land reform law known as the “Land to the tiller” law. Between 1971 and 1973, the Saigon government provided 106,550 landlords with 140.1 billion compensation in order to buy 758,011 hectares of cultivated land and imported machinery, so as to introduce a capitalist mode of production into agriculture (Son, 2007). The land reforms under this regime were the first step in a process aimed at liquidating the agricultural economy based on feudal exploitation, by abolishing tenancy and rent and replacing it with a small owners’ economy that would spontaneously advance towards a capitalist agricultural mode. However, poor farmers who were unable to resist capitalist concentration were pauperized and proletarianized, and whether a peasant was called a tenant or an agricultural worker, he or she continued to be exploited in the same way, only the name had changed. It can be argued that this land reform was a reactionary manoeuvre aimed, on the one hand, at attacking the peasantry, abolishing its revolutionary gains and maintaining the system of land grabbing started by the local landowners and the French and American colonialists, and on the other hand, at conducting deceptive demagogic propaganda among the peasant masses and reinforcing the puppet regime.

Therefore, the land policies of the Saigon government contained many inconsistencies for the majority of poor households, and their aim was to build the colonialists’ political power in rural regions. This was shown through the development of agricultural modernization and mechanization and the use of new rice varieties that helped transform rural production and promote economic growth, but leading to a social breakdown in the rural areas of the Mekong Delta. Some landowners shifted towards the capitalist elite and rapidly formed a rich class, whereas the poor farmers, especially the Khmers, were left or continued to be pennilessness. Moreover, the number of landowning Khmers reduced faster than those of the Kinh. After 1975, household land became fragmented due to land distribution policies introduced at that time (Tuyen, 2010). Some local areas "had 26.7% landless households of which 64.9%

were Khmer households, the number of hired labourers increased to more than 90%, employed for 250 days a year, while for more than 65% of households they were employed over 300 days a year” (Son, 2007). In addition, about 60% Khmers lacked of food for four to five months of the year and lived in shanties.

Hence, it can be clearly seen that under the colonial, feudalism regime, Khmer society faced great upheaval and was badly exploited and impoverished. This left the Khmer community very poor and as a result, it has continued to face great difficulties and complexities in terms of everyday lives.

2.1.3.4. Liberation in 1975

Unquestionably, agriculture in the Mekong Delta has developed since liberation, in quantitative as well as qualitative terms. On these aspects, the First Five-Year Plan (1976-1981) decided to extend to southern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta the state-planned economy and socialist style of agricultural that had been operating in the north (Le Coq, 2001). In the first two years (1975/1976), during its policy of forced collectivization, the Vietnamese government distributed agricultural land to the Khmer poor and landless peasants. Subsequently, the Khmer farmers continued working on their land, and local agriculture remained mainly based on family smallholdings. In the years 1977 to 1979, the fight against the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia aggravated difficulties experienced in the area, and many border villages in An Giang Province were destroyed or had to be moved inland. Moreover, the southern areas had to provide refuge to about 300,000 Khmer, Kinh, Hoa (ethnic Chinese) and Cham refugees fleeing Cambodia. As a consequence, the Khmers fell into absolute poverty again. After peace was established, most of Khmer farmers who had fled to towns or other provinces to avoid the fighting returned to their homes. However, according to Le Coq (2001) this collectivization policy was ineffective due to pressure from the rural labor force, and led to a decrease in the average farm size, causing farmers who had obtained land property rights after 30 years of conflict to offer strong resistance to their integration into the “collective structures” (Le coq, 2001).

For the Second Five-Year Plan (1981 to 1985), the state decided that land should be redistributed equally to household farmers under the “collective structure”

and according to the number of family members. Under this arrangement, large land holding farmers had to share a part of their land with smaller-scale farmers and even landless farmers. So, even under the collective structure, the government announced state directives and controlled farmers' applications (Le coq, 2001). This policy was met favorably by the Khmer farmers who were landless or had little land, as they were able to access land to cultivate and were able to try and increase their production levels per unit of land. Khmer agricultural practices before liberation were characterized by a monoculture of rice, with farming activities improved using fast-growing floating rice varieties with high yields. They also paid attention to the promotion of animal husbandry and handicrafts as well.

2.1.3.5. After *Doi Moi*

Beginning with Resolution No.10 in 1988, a renovation (*Doi Moi*) process started with a series of policies related to agriculture, the re-organization of production and input-output services, the aim being to move towards a multi-sectoral and market-oriented economy, with a leading role for the state and management sectors. Despite the achievements that were made under renovation, some social problems grew in importance during the course of the economic development that took place. De (2006) contends that the income gap between rich and poor farmers in the rural areas, and between rural and urban areas, became larger and larger. In addition higher unemployment and an increasing trend towards landless households occurred in rural areas, and especially in the Mekong Delta (De, 2006). Furthermore, most of the farmers became smallholders and lacked capital, having repeatedly divided their agricultural land and following a market economy system that gave for them small amounts of income, enough for subsistence but not for accumulation. Alongside this economic development, those Khmer with only a small parcel of land or those who were landless during that time also continued to face difficulties, in particular due to the disintegrated collective structures. Therefore, since the 1990s, the central government has made an effort to alleviate poverty in Vietnam, and in particular, in order to rehabilitate the Khmer's situation, decided to issue directive No 68 CT/TW in 1991, which included a socio-economic and political development plan for the Khmer

communities, in which firmer agricultural land distribution and business capital policies for poor Khmer households were introduced.

With Vietnam reforming its economy to a market-oriented one, shifting from a centrally planned to a market economy, the redistribution of land through land tenure reforms has helped clarify property rights, especially since the 1993 Land Law was introduced. More importantly, farmland has become a kind of commodity that farmers can sell, transfer, rent or mortgage. However, this has tended to lead to the concentration of land into the hands of a small number of farmers, while others have either had to engage in non-farm activities, or move to the urban areas. However, the opportunity to undertake these activities in order to earn additional income has been very limited. According to De (2006), although agricultural output made up 70 to 80% of the Mekong Delta's GDP up to 1995, the income gap has become bigger in the region. Large numbers of people in the Mekong Delta still live in poverty, and the number of landless and small farm households (less than 0.2 ha/household) has increased recently as part of the economic development process. In 1994, there were 12,250 landless households (0.7% of farm households) and 108,035 households (6.1%) that owned less than 0.2 ha of land. By 1997, the number of landless households represented 4.8% of the total (De, 2006:65). In particular, following this trend, Khmer farmers, especially the poor ones, have had to sell their land more often than the Kinh farmers, for a variety of reasons. Therefore, the impact of a number of factors introduced since renovation, such as the economic situation, has led to significant change among the Khmer.

2.2. The Government Poverty Reduction Program and its Impacts on the Khmer Community in An Giang Province in the Mekong Delta

Over the past several decades, the Vietnamese government has been pursuing poverty reduction programs in rural and mountainous areas. The focus of this section is on the national policies and programs with long term goals that have been used to do this and that have aroused debate. For example, there have been comprehensive hunger eradication programs introduced, targeted to some extent at the Khmer community.

2.2.1. Major Policies and Programs Addressing Poverty among the Khmer Ethnic Group

The ADB's country strategy and program (CSP) for Vietnam in 1993 aims to make poverty reduction its overarching goal. Thus, the overall objective of the CSP is to help achieve poverty reduction targets by combining employment-generating economic growth with interventions aimed at reducing social and regional imbalances. This has clear implications for ethnic minorities. First, poverty is to be poverty targeted, by identifying both the poorest geographical regions and the poorest sectors within these regions. The CSP recommends that the issue of social inclusion is adequately addressed in the government's goals and strategies.

The government of Vietnam is strongly committed to poverty reduction and during the 1990s developed a complex array of geographically targeted antipoverty programs and policies (Conway et al., 2001), and these initially were able to reduce the poverty rate by 21% (1993 to 1998), but from 1999 to 2003 the decline slowed to 8% (Pacode program, 2004). Due to this, the government implemented a Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) in 2003 and has since emphasized the need for continuous macro-economic growth in order to help with further poverty reduction. The reason for this emphasis is due to the fact that the poverty reduction that took place in the 1990s was "the direct result of the over 7% real GDP growth (Vietnam Poverty Analysis, 2002).

The most important of these programs is the Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction (HEPR) program, which includes Program No. 133 and 135, which assist communes in the most mountainous and remote areas. The HEPR program was established in 1996 with the objective of fighting poverty through the coordination and improvement of existing targeted poverty alleviation programs in the areas of education, health, agricultural extension, irrigation, job creation, training, micro-finance and basic infrastructure. It was implemented in a number of poor communes (1715 communes in 1998) as identified by MOLISA, although program funding and implementation remained under the line ministries responsible for specific sectors. Under this scheme, a commune is eligible to benefit from Program 133 grants if its poverty rate is above 40%, and poor households within these communes are eligible

for targeted assistance (such as free or subsidized schooling, health insurance cards, and sometimes exemption from local taxes). MOLISA conducts an annual exercise in which its district and commune representatives, along with party cadres, make lists of the poor households in each of the more than 10,000 communes in the country. Program 135 meanwhile was introduced to assist in the building of basic infrastructure in 1000 communes located in “especially difficult circumstances in mountainous and remote areas”. The Program was implemented by the Committee for Ethnic Minorities in Mountainous Areas in association with sector ministries. The mechanism used to target communes under Program 135 uses five criteria, which include the altitude of the commune, distance to the nearest town, the adult illiteracy rate, the productive structure and the poverty rate. In addition to Programs 133 and 135, a number of anti-poverty interventions have been introduced at the local level, such as transportation subsidies and higher salaries to teachers working in remote areas.

With respect to the poor in the Mekong Delta, the Vietnamese government has introduced many policies, programs and projects aimed at reducing poverty in the region, and primarily aimed at helping poor ethnic people. The Support for the Most Difficult and Remote Communes program (Program No 135), is run by the Committee for Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA) and was set up in 1999 in order to focus on infrastructure construction projects across 195 ethnic villages (MPDA, 2004) in the Mekong Delta including 28 ethnic villages in An Giang Province (An Giang people’s committee). In addition, 43 projects, in addition were set up to build inter-village centers in ethnic areas, to stabilize and develop agricultural and forest production in combination with the processing and marketing of agricultural products, plus to train commune and village cadres. Under the Program, resettlement projects have also been introduced in some areas. Program 134 was also introduced, based upon Decision 134/2004/QD-TT, in order to support the provision of agricultural land, housing and piped water to poor ethnic groups between 2005 and 2008. The project in An Giang Province has led to the construction of 5,420 houses and 54 piped water systems for all the Khmer communities involved (An Giang people’s committee, 2009).

Secondly, regarding economic policies, the Central Government has issued tax exemptions and reductions for agricultural land use since 2001, and these policies provided support for ethnic households in difficulty, and gave price and fee subsidies between 1998 and 2000; however, they were not implemented because it was felt they were not necessary for the ethnic communities in the Mekong Delta. Ethnic people's livelihoods in this region are not considered to be any more difficult than those in the central highlands or the mountainous areas of the north. In addition, preferential credit was also given to the poor between 2004 and 2006, the purpose being to help the development of small businesses, such as husbandry and trade.

In addition to these programs the Central Committee agreed upon a Resolution for Ethnic Minority Affairs in 2003, one that placed a focus on poor ethnic minorities. The main targets of this policy are the development of human capital, income generation methods, capacity building for officials, and special consideration to Khmer land issues. For the Mekong Delta region two other policies based on socio-economic development still exist: Decision 173 and Resolution 21. The former concentrates on high growth, job creation, education, floods and Khmer poverty reduction, while the latter focuses on landlessness, Khmer development issues, infrastructure, rural development and human capital (PACODE Program, 2008). On the other hand, in order to continue implementing Program 134's objectives, a Resolution 25 was formulated in 2008 to provide support on land settlement and occupation solutions for ethnic minorities in the region between 2008 and 2010.

In addition, Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects have been implemented among the poor ethnic groups of Vietnam in general and in the Mekong Delta in particular. One of the organisations addressing poverty reduction in Vietnam is CARE Denmark, in cooperation with CARE Vietnam and their partners in the alliance program named the Participatory Community Development Project, or PACODE which ran over a period of five years from 2005 to 2010 in two provinces of the Mekong Delta: An Giang and Soc Trang (Pacode, 2008). The goal of the Care Organization is "to help improve the well-being of people who lack access to resources and influence over decisions that affect their lives", under which PACODE's objective was to help those poor areas with a large population of Khmers

in the Mekong Delta. According to PACODE (2008), its main activities were to work with Women's Development Groups, micro-credit and income generation schemes, health care services, water and sanitation projects, and energy planning and community development networks (Pacode, 2008). PACODE placed significant emphasis on creating participation in terms of community development activities, and in addition, the idea was to build a network between the organisation and government in order to help design a poverty eradication scheme.

Furthermore, policies have been put in place to give priority support to the poor in education and training activities, such as identifying students for pre-universities, universities, colleges and vocational high schools. In An Giang since 2006, 1085 young Khmer people that been received training on a variety of common occupations, such as industrial and domestic sewing, husbandry, and mushroom cultivation and processing. After finishing their training courses, trainees are consulted by and recruited into urban and local companies. The central government exempts and reduces tuition fees and provides free notebooks for the poor pupils from villages with special difficulties.

The final project relates to health care, in which the authorities have, at the provincial to local level, provided health insurance cards, free medicine for the poor of villages in special difficulties; exemptions from and reductions in hospital fees for the poor. Almost all medical stations are located in eight districts of An Giang Province in which the Khmer reside, to make sure poor Khmer families can access them easily.

I selected Program 134 and Resolution 25 to be the focus of this study because they represent development assistance programs that impact directly upon the Khmer, and have done for five years, and they remain activate in An Giang Province and across the Mekong Delta in general.

2.2.2. Impacts of National Poverty Eradication Policies and Programs on the Khmer Community

The implementation process for policies, programs and projects in relation to poverty reduction differ from province to province, and the results also vary.

However, there are common impacts to be derived from the poverty reduction work, as follows. First of all, the programs and projects of Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction program (HEPR) for rural infrastructure, capital support and job creation have generally had an impact on the well-being of the poor. The wealth ranking of all households (poor, medium-income and better-off) has increased, and in particular, Program 135 and Program 134 have improved the quality of life for many poor villages and for those in special difficulties. Since the rural infrastructure has been improved, the influence of natural calamities, floods, droughts and epidemics has also been reduced. Inhabitants now have better access to markets, schools and hospitals than before; however, many more villages, such as coastal areas in Soc Trang and Tra Vinh, or mountainous areas in An Giang, still lack access to infrastructure and within these communities there are disadvantaged groups of Khmer who fall outside the reach of the national programs (MDPA, 2004).

MPDA (2004) also argues that awareness of the importance of poverty reduction work has not been widely disseminated among poverty reduction steering committees, especially at the village level and among poor people and other social classes. Poverty reduction has not been considered a focus in some areas, such that implementation has faced many difficulties. The instructions given by poverty reduction steering committees at different levels are still unspecific, and lack an analytical assessment of the specific, synchronous and suitable solutions required for each group. Supervision, monitoring and support work are also irregular.

On the other hand, as the findings of MDPA (2004) show, government programs designed to assist the poor in the Mekong Delta are dependant upon both the ability and interest of those administering them, together with an accurate understanding of the nature and scope of the experience of poverty. In other words, the effectiveness of national poverty programs is also limited by the lack of capacity of local officials to effectively plan, implement, monitor and evaluate such programs. Table 2.2 gives as an overview of the experiences of the poor and non-poor in their ability to access and utilize government services. It suggests that the poor have been able to make use of some specific services, but that their experience has been mixed and some programs have not achieved their aim of targeting the poor. Accessing

preferential credit for production development via banks and NGO micro-credit projects for the poor has promoted increased production for some households. In general, those projects implemented in the Mekong Delta to provide funds for cattle, shrimp and crab raising in saltwater and coastal areas, or for a combination of rice and fishing, have been successful; however, the threshold for the poor has also increased significantly (there are 969 escaped poor households in An Giang, but 625 of them became poor only in 2006) (An Giang People's Committee, 2009).

Table 2.2: Access to Government Services in the Mekong Delta

Policies and Services	Poor	Non-poor
Micro-credit	Receive small loans from the HEPR program; not enough for investment.	Take larger loans with collateral from banks
Agricultural Extension	Difficult to benefit from, due to limited means of production	Relatively easy to access and to take advantage
Irrigation	Limited direct benefits for those with little land, but large indirect benefits through more hired labor by better-off households	Direct benefits because have lots of land
Infrastructure Development	Have less money to get water and electricity meters installed; less equipment and activities requiring an intensive use of electricity or water	More direct benefits in terms of entertainment, clean water use, business and production development
Small Business Projects	Limited benefits due to ineffective implementation	Do not benefit because already have stable production activities
Agricultural Tax Exemptions	Little benefit for those with no or little land	Considerable direct benefit
Health Support Policies	Insurance cards make a considerable difference	No sizeable benefits
Education Support Policies	Support with text books appreciated, but secondary-level exemptions not considered useful as the poor rarely get to that level	No major benefit, but still possible to send children to school
Housing Support	A few people resettled to residential clusters or receive support for house repairs.	No benefit

Table 2.2: Access to Government Services in the Mekong Delta (Continued)

Policies and Services	Poor	Non-poor
Culture and Information Support	Benefit, but with little interest	Benefit
Relief Assistance Programs	Prioritized for relief assistance in flooding seasons	Able to cope with floods and use improved soil fertility
Emergency Relief for Risk Reduction	Prioritized	Not prioritized
Welfare Policies for Migrants and Women	Prioritized	Not applicable

Source: UNDP, AusAID (2003) and the MDPA (2004)

2.3. Summary

My detailed historical analysis of the change from a colonial regime into a socialist system shows that Khmer society in Vietnam has experienced significant change, plus I have examined the historical approach and economic and political changes that have occurred in order to better understand the root causes of the Khmer's poverty. As revealed, the intervention of national poverty alleviation policies and projects has helped to reduce poverty rates slightly in the Mekong Delta region, but there appears to be a hard core of poor cases who have missed the economic and other opportunities opened up in recent years. There also remains a high level of vulnerability within some areas, among the Khmer minority in particular. In other words, from the poverty alleviation point of views these policies have had both positive and negative impacts, so they need to better target the needs of the disadvantaged groups.

By analyzing the consequences of national development policies in the Mekong Delta and the roots causes of the Khmer's poverty, I have raised questions as to how the Khmer people themselves characterize and analyze their own poverty. In the following chapter I will continue with a discussion of the different meanings of poverty among the residents of the Khmer study village, how they perceive and identify poverty, as this will help me to draw a more detailed picture about the Khmer living in the Mekong Delta.